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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study of the reactions that 65 European American preservice teachers had to the community service learning (CSL) component of a multicultural education course. The CSL project was intended to facilitate the development of intercultural competence and to foster the idea of teachers as agents of social justice. Data analysis revealed that community service learning in relationship to multicultural education both supported and subverted the goals of the course. For many of the preservice teachers, deficit notions about low-income families and families of color were reinforced. CSL created a new awareness of diversity for a few of the students. The values and outcomes fostered by CSL in this context are discussed and problematized. Differential power relationships and issues of privilege that come with being European American and middle class need to be carefully considered if CSL is to facilitate the development of multicultural teachers. Contains 23 references. (Author/BT)

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Constructing the Other Through Community Service Learning

Karen Grady
Indiana University

SO 030 898

Karen Grady

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Abstract

This article describes an exploratory study of the reactions 65 European-American preservice teachers had to the community service learning (CSL) component of a multicultural education course. The CSL project was intended to facilitate the development of intercultural competence and to foster the idea of teachers as agents of social justice. Analysis of the data revealed that community service learning in relationship to multicultural education both supported and subverted the goals of the course. For many of the preservice teachers, deficit notions about low-income families and families of color were reinforced. For a very few students, CSL created a new awareness of diversity. The values and outcomes fostered by CSL in this context are discussed and problematized. Differential power relationships and issues of privilege that come with being European-American and middle-class need to be carefully considered if CSL is to facilitate the development of multicultural teachers.

The diversity of America's classrooms may well be the most critical issue facing teachers and teacher educators today. Students of color already represent a majority of the school age population in twenty-three of the largest cities in the U.S. and some estimates project that students of color will be as much as forty percent of the school population by the year 2000 (Delpit, 1995). Additionally, over twenty percent of America's school children live in poverty (Bennett, 1995). These populations, particularly when they intersect, have historically faced and continue to face discrimination in America's schools. Decades of research in the fields of anthropology, education, and sociology have illuminated the relationships between the social and economic status of students' families and their educational achievement (e.g., Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Willis, 1977). Research also suggests that schools as institutions function to maintain and reproduce the economic and political status quo, that is, to ensure that members of the white middle and upper classes remain the dominant group against a threateningly pluralistic society (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

At present, most students enrolled in teacher education programs (as well as the teacher educators themselves) are European-American and come from middle class backgrounds (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). They were and are, for the most part, successful students because school is an institution designed for their success. In other words, inequities regarding access to and outcomes of schooling are invisible to them because of their own relative position of privilege in school and in society.

While many teacher educators find themselves working in a privileged setting in which most of their students are from the dominant culture, they are committed to the vision that teachers can become agents of social justice and schools sites of contestation and change (Giroux, 1981). Teacher educators who have researched and written about their own efforts toward a critical praxis with white middle-class students have noted the possibilities and difficulties of facilitating

critique of systemic inequality and its ideological underpinnings when that means students recognizing their own roles and interest in supporting the social order as it exists (e.g., Ahlquist, 1991; Sleeter, 1996).

I find myself in a similar position teaching a secondary reading methods course at a large midwestern university. Students usually take this course in their senior year after they have taken the required multicultural education course. The reluctance of many preservice teachers in my course to critique practices such as tracking and standardized testing made me aware that many of their assumptions about schooling still remained unquestioned even as they approached their student teaching and graduation. I am interested in the ways in which preservice teachers who are members of the dominant group might come to examine their own assumptions about the deficiencies of others, about who deserves an education, and about the exclusionary practices of the institution of schooling.

Community Service Learning

One recommendation for involving students in thinking beyond their own personal needs and interests is the inclusion of community service learning (CSL) in the curriculum. Much of the literature on community service learning focuses on experiences at the elementary and secondary levels (e.g. Conrad and Hedin, 1991, Kinsley, 1993, Perrone, 1993). This literature notes fostering a sense of altruism and a spirit of civic duty as goals of CSL, as well as developing skills related to the world of work, such as planning and implementing projects. These goals tend to reflect an individualistic view of service and often emphasize how the person giving service benefits. While researchers have chronicled the potential for CSL to provide transformative learning experiences for students (Goodman, 1994), at some point in our advocacy of service learning, we must step back and ask, as did Kahne and Westheimer (1996), "in the service of what?" In fact, researchers have begun to examine some of the assumptions that undergird community service learning and

to point to the need for a critical analysis of the values fostered and of the potential for problematic outcomes that can be promoted by service learning experiences that are depoliticized (Jones, Maloy, and Steen, 1996).

Kahne and Westheimer (1996) distinguish between the service learning goals of charity and change, two orientations in the relationships established between the provider and the receiver of service. The goal of charity emphasizes the development of altruism and giving as one's civic duty. The focus is on what occurs for those serving. Kahne and Westheimer explain the goal of change as focused on what those serving and those receiving service can do together to transform society. But even within efforts to transform society, what might remain unquestioned is why the intolerable exists for some people and not for others, that is, what forces created the economic and social positions of those serving and those being served in the first place?

Community Service Learning and Multicultural Education

The decision by two professors to incorporate community service learning into the multicultural education course they teach gave me a chance to explore some of the issues that had been surfacing in my own teaching as well as in the literature about community service learning. Both professors articulated the following three goals for the CSL component of the course: 1) that community service learning would provide preservice teachers with experiences in cross-cultural interaction, 2) that preservice teachers would learn about low-income and ethnic minority communities, and 3) that community-based service learning would deepen understanding of the particular course goals of strengthening cultural consciousness and intercultural competence and combating prejudice and discrimination.

In the context of including community service learning in a course on multicultural education, there are several questions to ask: To what extent does

community service learning create a space for critical analysis of issues of the inequitable distribution of power and wealth, of structural inequalities, and of institutional racism? Does this curricular component enable preservice teachers from the dominant culture to begin to apprehend the different realities of children from marginalized groups? Does it challenge beliefs of preservice teachers that would support educational inequity? In this report, I want to describe my interpretations of how many of the preservice teachers responded to the community service learning experience that was part of their multicultural education course. In doing this, I want to foreground the role played by their own position of privilege vis a vis the position of those families who were served by the community agencies with which they were involved. I want to highlight the unquestioned assumptions that seemed to inform the service learning experience.

The Present Study

Sixty-five preservice teachers, who were enrolled in two sections of a required multicultural education course participated in the community service learning projects. One section was for elementary education majors, the other for those who will become secondary teachers. All of the preservice teachers are European-Americans and eighty percent identified themselves as middle-class. The professors organized the preservice teachers into twelve teams of four to six members. Teams were to choose the community agencies with which they wanted to work, although not all teams received their first choice placements. They were required to complete twenty hours in the field during an eight week period and to submit a written report from their own inquiry project about their site. The community agencies were selected by the professors because these agencies work with minority and/or low-income youth and other diverse populations, such as adults with developmental disabilities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data that I am drawing from include twenty-four team interviews (two interviews with each team) and the written reports that each team of students did about the community agency where they worked. The teams were interviewed twice during the semester, the first time about three weeks into the CSL projects and then at the end of the semester when they had completed their hours. These data present only a partial view of the experience and indeed my interpretation is also only a partial view of what occurred. For another analysis of these same data, as well as additional data collected, see Boyle-Baise, 1998. My particular interest was in how community service learning as a curricular component of multicultural education might enable preservice teachers to examine the structural inequalities that exist in society and therefore in schools, and to critically reflect on the social and economic privileges that come with being European-American and middle-class. The data were analyzed with attention to statements that left unquestioned inequality and injustice as well as to statements that represented a willingness to challenge the status quo. I read through the interview transcripts, written projects, and classroom observation notes several times and developed conceptual categories (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) that point to the possibility of community service learning both supporting and subverting multicultural education goals which focus on social justice and teachers as agents of change.

Findings

Four categories emerged from the data that reflect the tension between the reproductive and counter-hegemonic potentials of community service learning as it was actualized in this particular context. These categories were: 1) poverty and poor parenting, 2) we really are all the same, 3) charity, not change 4) reconstructing beliefs about the Other.

Poverty and Poor Parenting

For several of the preservice teachers who participated in the community service learning projects, it appears that the CSL experience enabled them to draw certain conclusions about the inadequacy of low-income parents. Preservice teachers in five of the twelve groups stated that when the children behaved as if they wanted attention, it meant that they were not receiving adequate attention at home and were, therefore, not really cared for or loved by their parents or guardians. Two preservice teachers made the following comments about the families and children at two community centers:

> P: I see a lot of single mothers and they may have to work until 5:00 and these girls don't have anywhere to go or anyone to be with so they go there [to the center]. And the field trips help parents a lot. These kids--to have a field trip, their eyes just light up like they don't get to do anything. And simple things like a volleyball game. . .It's just something that small, you have to think maybe their home life isn't that good. (interview 10/30/96)
>
> R: . . .A lot of them are clingy. I worked at a girls club at home, and they weren't like that. These kids won't share you. They are hungry for adult attention. . .They don't have attention at home. And they just play at the club. No family involvement at all. (interview 10/30/96)

These statements may actually reflect a lack of experience with younger children who might vie for the attention of an adult in particular social contexts. Because these preservice teachers were interacting with children who were at a community center in a lower-income area, their judgment of children's behavior as somehow abnormal was quickly attributed to inadequate parenting which they then explained as directly related to parents' low-income status.

Two other preservice teachers embedded within their construction of low-income families as uncaring an additional distinction. In a description that brings to

mind a colonialist discourse about primitive/exotic Others, one elementary education major distinguished between what is strange (hygiene being taught at school) and what is natural (hygiene being taught at home):

> J: . . .when we walked in I saw them brushing their teeth and they were constantly being reminded to wash their hands, all the time stressing the whole hygiene thing. It was strange for me to see that because it's just been like a natural thing. My mother always told me to do it and it was shocking to see that they had to come to their school, to Head Start, to learn how to do that. . .It was really shocking, but it wasn't necessarily the kids' fault. It's good that they got to learn that. (interview 12/11/96)

Following this statement in the interview, another elementary education major added that in another child-care center where she volunteers she sees a similar kind of "strangeness," that of children dressing themselves:

> M: Right now I assist at Happy Day pre-school. Over 75% of them can't speak English or are from different minority groups. Some of the kids, their parents just drop them off. You can see they dress themselves. Five year-olds will have mismatched socks. Maybe the kids are to learn that kind of stuff on their own. But I feel like they aren't being taken care of at home. (interview 12/11/96)

The following comment illustrates the confirmation of a commonly held belief among school personnel, that parents who are not members of the dominant culture are not committed to or involved in the education of their children in the "right" ways (Lareau, 1989). One student expressed the view that from the community service learning experience she has learned that children from low-income families will be difficult to teach:

> P: It's going to be hard to deal with them [as students] because they [the parents] aren't giving them anything at home. No parent support. It will be

> hard to get parents involved. I saw one parent who came dressed nice and seemed like she enjoyed her kid. And she seemed like she just came from a job. Some look like they have been home all day. (12/11/96)

Dangerous beliefs held by some preservice teachers about the families of low-income students, about how little they will be involved, how little they care, and how difficult it will be to teach such students were reified by the CSL experience. For those preservice teachers whose attitudes toward the children shifted, many still ascribed blame to the parents for not adequately providing for their children without questioning why these families live in the situations that they do, without questioning what structural inequalities exist that create poverty. In the group interview at the end of the semester, one elementary education major stated that her perceptions had been confirmed even though she added that her understanding of what is true about low-income families can also be extended to include members of other socio-economic classes.

> E: . . .with the low income, I always had a sense that the parents really didn't give them [attention]. . .I mean that's very stereotypical, but I have actually found out that that's kind of true, that the parents don't really care as much about their children as they should. But then again that can happen in [other] socio-economic classes. So it's what I thought was really true, but that's not to say that's only going to happen in low socio-economic [classes]. (interview 12/11/96)

Another student seemed to indicate that teachers need to know the economic status of their students in order to counteract poor parenting, not to counteract the ways in which low-income students might be treated in schools:

> B: I think we need to be aware of their [students'] economic status . . .we've seen that these kids are not getting the attention at home so maybe we need to give them extra attention at school and make sure that they are

part of the classroom, giving at school what they aren't getting at home. (interview 12/11/96)

We Are All the Same

Not only were deficit beliefs about the Other reinforced for several of the preservice teachers, but the belief that institutions, such as schools, are fair or at least neutral and experienced in the same way by all students remained unchallenged by the CSL experience, even though it was directly addressed in the textbook for the course and in class lectures and activities (Bennett, 1995, observation notes 11/96). Students' relative positions of privilege remained invisible. In response to the question of whether or not the CSL project had changed their thinking about teaching culturally diverse youth, two preservice teachers at two different sites commented:

> K: Basically it didn't change my approach because I grew up with much [diversity] in classrooms and so to me, students are students. Everybody has an equal opportunity to learn. (interview 12/11/96)
>
> A: I know that this is bad to say, but before I did this, I always felt lower income means, you have a certain picture that comes into your mind. But after working at Head Start, they are just the same little kids that we were. They want the same things. Their parents might have to struggle a little more than our parents did, but they all just want the same things. . . . I think of everybody as more of an equal after working with Head Start. (interview 12/11/96)

On the one hand, the idea that children are children and perhaps similar in many ways should not necessarily be problematic. Indeed, it could mean that the prospective teachers as members of the dominant culture are working toward interrogating their own biases and are taking an ethical stance toward teaching all the students who enter their classrooms. Many of the preservice teachers stated that

the experience had made them keenly aware that they will need to adjust their teaching in order to reach students with so many different "learning styles" and such diverse needs. On the other hand, it could also mean that when a teacher believes that all children are equal, it militates against understanding systemic inequalities and discrimination such that no further action on the part of the teacher (or the group of teachers who make up a school staff) is necessary. Christine Sleeter (1996) explains:

> If discrimination consists largely of one-on-one acts by overtly prejudiced people, then the solution must be to be open-minded and accept everyone. If I as a teacher adopt an open attitude, I am not part of a problem. This line of thinking denies a need to learn much that people of color are saying, but it is a common view (p. 142).

Ironically, the ideology that America is the land of equal opportunity was bolstered by seeing marginalized youth being well-served in some of the community agencies. Complicated by the compensatory views in which community agencies are sometimes grounded philosophically, young, inexperienced preservice teachers would be hard-pressed to question that "good" was being done. In one of the final reports the team stated:

> We found through observing, participating, and interviewing that Head Start has a profound effect on the children and families it serves. Many of these children in the classroom have little structure in their lives, far less than many children. Head Start prepares children to enter kindergarten, which could otherwise be a very traumatic transition for them. . .Head Start does not take for granted what these kids have already learned in their homes [italics added]. They teach children the basics, from shapes, colors, counting, to brushing their teeth. Though we have participated for only a brief period of

> time, we have found through our interviews that Head Start causes great changes in the children it serves [italics added]. (written report 11/25/96)

Head Start and family literacy programs do not take for granted that low-income children and children of color are learning social and literacy practices of value in their homes. However, studies have refuted the idea that these families do not support the literacy development of their children (Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Still, families of color and the poor are expected to change to be ready for school. It is not expected that schools will change to be ready for them. The reciprocity that is the foundation of an empowering relationship does not exist. A belief in the benefits of a compensatory approach aimed at assimilation into the dominant culture is reflected in the above quote. That kindergarten or early childhood education might be reconceptualized from a multicultural perspective is not evidenced in this write-up of the CSL experience.

Charity Not Change

Ward (1997) discusses the problematic practices that can occur when European-American middle-class college students are involved in service learning projects with low-income and ethnic minority communities. The vitriolic rhetoric about the poor and people of color so prevalent in the media has helped to shape beliefs that those receiving services should be:

> passive, willing (and grateful) recipients of the students' charitable impulses. This 'I give/they receive' orientation. . .impedes the development of real caring relationships in which mutual expectations, responsibilities, and benefits are shared by both those who help and those being helped (p. 144).

It is worth quoting at length excerpts from one group's final report about the Boys and Girls Club, because it provides evidence of the superior position in which these particular preservice teachers viewed themselves in relation to the service agency and the families being served. It is a good example of the problematic

practices to which Ward refers. The colonialized discourse also represents a positioning that may be exacerbated by requiring members of the dominant culture to provide service to less powerful groups. The passage also illustrates very well the ideology that a lack of material resources is linked to a lack of individual effort--an ideology that will not help transform classrooms and schools into locations of social justice.

> The facilities do not provide ample space and activities for the children. The building is too small to staff all of the children. There are not enough staff members to give the children the attention that they need. The club offers a snack almost everyday for the children. . . however, the snack is usually not healthy. . . . Our main concern was that these kids were not getting proper nutrition. . . .Once a week Subway donates food but most other days their "snack" is peanut butter and crackers, or something else just as unhealthy. . . .
>
> The interview [with the director] proved significant because it led us to believe that the program just is not showing many improvements. [The director] was fully aware of the things we brought up, so our question is "Why isn't anything being done?" We realize that it is not easy to get food donated and the budget is tight but if they [the community agency] really wanted to make a difference then we are sure they could do it. These kids need a safe and healthy environment where people truly care about them. . . . Many of the needs the children had were the same. They needed nutritious snacks or meals, total and complete attention, structure and positive discipline. These discoveries will help us as future teachers to see the needs and meet the needs of our students. (written report 11/25/96)

In the seven page report there are no questions raised about why a major provider of after-school day care in the city has to depend on donated food for the children or why a facility serving predominantly low-income families is too small or not

adequately staffed for the number of children it serves. These conditions, which may well have deserved critique, were considered to be the individual responsibility of the director that could be remedied with greater effort. The notion that systemic inequality and injustice can be addressed by more individual effort on the part of those with the least power and privilege can translate into classroom practices that continue to hold the students most oppressed by society responsible for their own victimization.

The "we gave/they gratefully received" orientation shows up in the following excerpt from another final report. Again, the inadequacy of the families is noted as is the preservice teachers' understanding that it has been remedied by the good will of those in a position to serve.

> The kids who visit B. Center seems very comfortable with us. They respect us, as we do them. We feel it is because of our initiative and respect that they have reciprocated. They appreciate the attention that we were able to devote to each one of them on a personal level. We learned during our visits that many of the kids live in an emotionally unstable home. Many come from single-parent families with multiple brothers and sisters. Therefore, the attention that they get from home is limited. Our commitment to come to the center each week made a difference to them. . . (written report 11/25/96)

Reconstructing Beliefs about the Other

Many statements made by the preservice teachers who participated in the community service learning project in these two sections of multicultural education tell a cautionary tale about the potential for service learning to adequately disrupt their problematic beliefs that social stratification and educational inequity are matters of extra attention and individualized instruction. But spaces of critique, of awareness did emerge. During one of the interviews which I conducted, an

elementary education major did respond to her group's construction of single-parent families and poor families as uncaring:

> J: Yes, most of these kids come from poverty because of the area of town the center is in. And the center is there to give the kids attention. But I don't think all the situations are the same. Yes, they might be from single parent family, but a lot of times I don't think that has any reliance on the attention they get. The parents could love these kids just as much as any normal typically average family does, but because they live in poverty and the parent working long hours might be why they're at the center. A lot of kids I've talked to talk good about their parents. When their parents pick them up they are excited to come and see them. . . . On the side of town where they bring in more money and have bigger houses there are still many who don't get the attention they need. (interview 10/30/96)

In the end of semester interview with this same group, another elementary education major had observed:

> A: A lot of people I think, view the low economic section of town thinking, "Oh they don't care, they don't have any morals, no responsibilities." . . .I mean not all, I mean some of the families get involved too and there are a lot of parents that you see come and find out how the afternoon went, what homework was done, and what wasn't done, stuff like that. . . (interview 12/11/96)

The preservice teacher quoted below directly attributes his new understanding of low-income children as capable and motivated and hopeful to the community service learning experience.

> N: You would think maybe because of their home life that they wouldn't care about. . .but these kids come in here and I have seen them run up to the person in charge and [say] I need a tutor, I need a tutor. It's not like us coming

> to them. It's them, they want the help, they want to learn. And I think that's maybe a stereotype that people see when [they] think of low-income families, they are lazy, they don't care. (interview 12/11/96)

Resistance to the characterization of poor families as less caring appeared to open a space for others in the group to reconsider their conclusions. Students responded that parents might have to work two jobs to provide for the family, therefore having less time, but not less love. One student said that the families care enough about their children to send them to the center. An important shift in thinking occurred when poor families dropping children off at a community center was interpreted as an act of support and caring for the children rather than an act of neglect. This points to the necessity of finding ways in teacher education courses to go beyond reflection as an act of "This is what I think" to reflection as an act of "This is another perspective I can imagine."

In response to the question, "Has your thinking about low income or culturally diverse communities changed in any way?" media images were challenged and stereotypic representations acknowledged:

> T: Yes, it changed. From the books you read and things you see on TV, you get an idea that it is rough and that you know that you are risking your life by going into that area. I don't know, driving over there it didn't seem very different from any other part of town that I have been in. I don't know, I didn't feel as threatened there or. . .none of those things were there that you are stereotypically taught are in low income areas. (interview 12/11/96)

The few instances of critique in the interviews and final written projects do not mean that taken for granted notions about the self and others were not discussed, critiqued, or disrupted in other conversational contexts that the preservice teachers shared with each other. Continued introspection after the course ended may have led to a different understanding of social inequality, of

privilege, and of the how these issues materialize in the social practices of institutions such as schools. Those who appeared to come to some understanding about cultural diversity and their relationship to the Other were those preservice teachers who were able to see the experience as providing them with insight into who they are--who viewed it as an opportunity to critically examine their positionality, in addition to whatever might be learned about someone else.

Conclusion

This experimental course and exploratory study raise issues and questions that warrant further research. What were the particularities of the experiences that did disrupt deficit notions of the Other? Did service in some agencies better serve the goals of multicultural education than service in other agencies? How does the power that professors hold over students figure into the power dynamics that are played out in the service learning sites? Can service learning be actualized as social action or does service learning inherently reinforce hierarchical relationships?

My intention in writing about this exploratory study was to problematize community service learning in relation to what might otherwise be considered reasonable outcomes for a course in a teacher education program. Preservice teachers did learn that not all students in their classrooms will be like the students they were and are. They did come to understand that students learn in many different ways, that they have an incredible range of backgrounds and talents and needs. What is less apparent is that the community service experience facilitated a deep understanding of how oppressive practices limit access for certain families and their children and of how people can work toward social justice--critical goals for a course in multicultural education. For only a very few students did it provide insight into the structural dimensions of inequality and injustice and what it means for members of the dominant culture to share their power and privilege with marginalized members of the same community.

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